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RELIGION *Plain, not Mysterious;*

OR,

REASON *the Judge of all Doctrines.*

693.d 19
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A

SERMON

PREACH'D in

LONDON.

By *GEORGE JOHNSTON.*

Incorrupta Fides nudaque Veritas
Quando ullum invenient Parem?
HOR. Car. Lib. I.

LONDON:
Printed for J. ROBERTS, near the *Oxford-Arms* in *Warwick-Lane.* MDCCXXXIII.

A

SERMON

Preach'd in

LONDON

By GEORGE SWINFDEN.

Interrupta Pulsa medicina Febris
Quando nullum invenient Portum?

LONDON:

Printed for J. Roberts, near the Oxford-Arms in Warwick-Lane.

TO

ALL, who are Friends

TO

GENUINE LIBERTY,

AND

Honeſt Patrons

OF

TRUTH *and* VIRTUE;

The enſuing

DISCOURSE

Is, with the higheſt Reſpect,

DEDICATED by their

Moſt Humble, and

Obedient Servant,

G. Johnſton.

THE PREFACE To the READER.

IT was not an Itch for ſcribbling, nor the Vanity of appearing an Author, that incited me to this Publication. No; my principal Aims were to defend Truth, and recommend it to the Conſideration and Embraces of my Fellow-Chriſtians, in order to their Advancement in Knowledge and Virtue, and to make 'em charitable one to another, notwithſtanding their different Sentiments about Religion. And if my Endeavours happen to have their intended Effect, I ſhall, certainly,

ly, eſteem it the nobleſt Reward, and prize it infinitely above every other Advantage whatſoever.

For the better accompliſhing theſe deſirable Ends which I propos'd, I have, in the following Diſcourſe, deſignedly avoided a cloſe and abſtracted way of reaſoning, and taken a plain and eaſy Method. And if I have committed any Miſtakes in what I have advanc'd, I ſhall readily acknowledge them when they appear to me; it being, in my Opinion, more honourable to do ſo, than, thro' Pride or Shame, to palliate and conceal them; or, againſt clear Conviction, to perſiſt in defending them. Truth is really venerable and ſacred, and I ſhall always pay the higheſt Regard to it.

JOHN XI. latter Part of the 26th Verſe.

Believeſt thou this?

ALTHO' Truth and Falſhood are, in themſelves, ſimple and naked, and as diſtinct from each other as Light and Darkneſs; yet if we conſider that they may be miſrepreſented to us, or varniſh'd over with artful Colours, we ſhall find it neceſſary for us, in all Caſes of Importance, to examine Matters with Care and Candor, becauſe our Happineſs here and hereafter does, in a great meaſure, depend upon it; and no true Faith, which is the Fruit of Induſtry and the Support of Virtue, can be acquir'd without it.

THERE is not a Man in the World, who thinks at all, can be ſatisfied about the Safety either of his temporal or ſpiritual Affairs, unleſs he is convinc'd that they are in a right Poſition.

Poſition. Nor can he attain to any Conviction, if he is not active in enquiring how they are. But, as Religion is of the higheſt Importance, it nearly concerns him to examine it, that he may be perſonally ſure when he is right or wrong, or whether he believes in God or Man. By this his Sincerity is firſt to be known, and the whole of his Obedience is to be denominated after it. For, as the Liberty of a Man conſiſts in his having a Power to view and compare the various Objects, among which he is converſant, in order to his making a proper or improper Choice; ſo his Virtue lies in freely exerciſing that Power, and in purſuing thoſe Objects, to which his Underſtanding, after examining and comparing them, gives the Preeminence.

THUS, a Perſon has a Power to draw off his Thoughts from one thing to another, to examine the Natures or Qualities of both, and to compare the Ideas which he forms of 'em, that he may, thereby, know which is moſt eligible. And tho' he is not free, but rather paſſive, in receiving the Report of his Judgment concerning them; yet he was certainly free to make the Enquiry and Compariſon; and, muſt be allow'd to be ſo, likewiſe, in the Order of his future Actions. He has the ſame Power to act, or not act, according to his beſt Judgment, after he has maturely examin'd theſe things, that he had at firſt to examine or compare them; and he had the

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ſame Liberty to examine them at firſt, that he has afterward to perſue his Choice, or, to embrace the Object which appears moſt valuable.

HENCE it is that we are to be denominated Free-Agents, as we are capable of enquiring into the Natures of things, of forming a Diſtinction between Good and Evil, Truth and Falſhood, or the like; and of attaining to a Knowledge or Belief, which of 'em are beſt, or moſt worthy our Perſuit. And,

HENCE it is that we are either virtuous or vicious, accordingly as we improve the Powers which we have, and behave in the Relations and Circumſtances of Life, in which we are providentially placed. Free Agency is peculiar to intelligent Beings, and we only act well when we follow Conviction, and conduct our ſelves by right Reaſon. And,

BY this we may learn, why Happineſs, in the Goſpel, was entail'd upon Faith, and Miſery denounc'd againſt Unbelief. It was not to prejudice human Judgments, or to wheedle and fright Men into a credulous Temper. No; but to make them unprejudic'd and free in their Enquiries, and ſo bring 'em fairly to a Belief of the Truth. This was the Deſign of all the Goſpel-Motives, and any other would have been very unjuſt. For,

RELIGION, which is only conſiſtent with Sincerity, and always built upon private Judgment, ſhould never be enforc'd by Power and Authority, nor recommended by arbitrary or deſpotick Sanctions. A free Enquiry ought always to be encourag'd; but neither alluring nor coercive Means ſhould be us'd, to proſelyte Men to any particular Scheme, or to draw 'em over to a particular Profeſſion. When-ever ſuch Methods are, really, taken, the Intereſt of Religion ſinks of courſe, the Root and Foundation of it decays, and the ſure Conſequence is Depravation of Morals. Conſcience, in ſuch caſe, will loſe its Influence, and Men will, eaſily, be prevail'd upon to violate its Laws; or, at leaſt, will ſometimes prevaricate or diſſemble, for the ſake of the Advantages propos'd to 'em. And thus, inſtead of acquiring virtuous Habits, or ſuch Qualities as are graceful and good, they will gradually contract brutal Diſpoſitions, and, blindly, follow every prevailing Appetite, without any Remorſe or Controul. Therefore, I ſay, that the only Reaſon, why Faith and Infidelity, in the Goſpel, are made to ſtand upon ſo unequal Terms, muſt be to engage Men to be ſincere, in enquiring into the Nature of the Goſpel-Conſtitution and Laws, and in diſcharging the ſeveral Obligations, which their Faith or Conviction (whatever we ſuppoſe it) might afterward ſubject them to: To make them

continue

continue, likewiſe, in a courſe of Sincerity, and perſiſt in the conſtant Practice of Religion; there being the ſame Obligation incumbent upon them, to go on in a right way, that there was at firſt to enquire after it, or exerciſe their Reaſon in order to diſcern it.

BUT what I intend at preſent, is only,

I. TO explain the nature of Faith, or Believing in general; and

II. To improve the Subject to ſuch good Purpoſes, as may be of ſome Service towards the Direction of human Life and Manners.

To begin, then, with the

I. FAITH in general muſt certainly ſignify the Aſſent of the Mind to a Propoſition, which, after enquiring, it underſtands, or in which it perceives an Agreement of Terms with its own Ideas, without any real Repugnancy between them. 'Tis the Aſſent of the Mind, I ſay, to a Propoſition, or to a variety of Propoſitions, which it underſtands, and to theſe alone; it being impoſſible for us to believe that of which we are ignorant, tho' it be ever ſo great or important a Truth in it ſelf. This will appear very plain and obvious, by conſidering any thing that occurs in common Life. Suppoſe a Perſon might relate a Matter of Fact to

us, in unintelligible Diſcourſe, or, in a Language that we never learn'd, we could not poſſibly aſſent to it; becauſe we could form no Judgment of it anſwerable to the Account which it might be deſign'd to convey, or the Truth which it might really contain. Or, in caſe we underſtand the Language in which any Propoſition is expreſs'd; yet if we don't, likewiſe, know the Meaning of it, or ſee in what Senſe 'tis true, we can't give any ſolid Faith to it; for, then, we might be ſaid to believe that, of which we have no determinate Ideas, or of which we can form no true Judgment at all: than which nothing more abſurd or ridiculous could, poſſibly, be aſſerted.

EVERY thing that is unintelligible, is incapable of being believ'd by us, as well as every thing that implies a downright Abſurdity. Nay, the latter, in ſome reſpects, may be ſaid to beſpeak ſome ſort of Faith from us, while the former can claim nor pretend to none: the one appearing what it really is, but the other aſſuming no viſible Form. And,

HENCE it is that all contradictory Propoſitions, ſuch as that a thing may be, and, at the ſame time, not be; that a Square and a Circle are one; that there is no difference between moral Good and Evil; between one and two; between even and odd, or the like; being in their own nature falſe, ſeem

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ſo at firſt view to any Underſtanding; becauſe they deſtroy one another, have no real Exiſtence in Nature, nor any thing to recommend them, but Name and Sound.

HENCE it is, too, that whatever is myſterious in its Nature, can demand no other Aſſent from us, than that it is myſterious, and therefore can't be believ'd by us to be true in any particular Senſe, ſince we cannot perceive an Agreement between the Terms of the Propoſition which contains it, nor have any clear or determinate Ideas of it. Nor, could any Authority whatever lay us under an Obligation to believe any more of it than this, namely, that it is above our Reaſon, which is pretty much the ſame as to ſay that it don't concern us. Nay, the Command of God himſelf (if we could ſuppoſe him to enjoin upon us the Belief of Myſteries) could not oblige us to believe them in any determinate Senſe; becauſe we don't know what they, really, are, whether true or falſe, good or evil; or what we are to believe about them.

THE only Judge, therefore, of all things that concern our Faith, is our own Reaſon or Underſtanding, which diſcovers to us the Quality of them, and, thereupon, leaves us room to conclude that they are true or otherwiſe, and ſo are worthy our Credit or not. Nay, ſo near an Affinity do believing and underſtanding bear to one another, that, if they

they be not Words of the ſame Importance, they, at leaſt, are, often, as inſeparably connected, as cloſely blended, and as immediately conſequent one upon the other, as the Shadow and Subſtance. For tho' we commonly confine our notion of believing to things which we ſuppoſe to be true; yet, if Cuſtom and Uſe had not appropriated the Word to this particular Senſe, we might as well apply it to things that are falſe; and, if we examine, we ſhall, perhaps, find, that we, ſometimes, do it. For, what do we mean, when we ſay, this or the other Propoſition is true, but that we underſtand, by fair deductions of our Reaſon, it is true, and therefore believe it to be ſo? Or what do we mean, when we ſay, this or the other Propoſition is falſe, but that we underſtand it is falſe, and believe that it is ſuch in its nature? This is certainly our Meaning when we ſpeak our Sentiments in either caſe. So that Underſtanding and Believing, properly ſo called, are Words of, almoſt, the ſame Importance. And no ſooner is any thing, whether natural or moral, that is intelligible in its nature, propos'd to us, but, after examining it, we believe it to be either true or falſe. And if we don't know the real nature of it, we muſt (to avoid Credulity and Impoſture) ſuſpend our Aſſent, until we do know it.

And yet, there is nothing more common than to hear ſome Men, of an odd ſort of Faith, indeed, every day crying down human Reaſon; telling the World, we are fallen Creatures; that our Underſtandings (they ſhould only ſay their own) are weak; and we ought not to judge of Myſteries by them. And this is not only the common Language of ſome weak Perſons in the modern Age, but it is, likewiſe, what the Schoolmen of old maintain'd. They repreſented every abſtruſe Point in Divinity, which they could not explain, nor reconcile with common Senſe, as myſterious in its nature, and above human Reaſon; but, at the ſame time, aſſerted, that it was a matter of Faith. And, the better to palm their Doctrines upon the World, and make them go down more glibly with the Populace, they, with ſome Subtilty, diſtinguiſh'd between things above Reaſon, and things contrary to it. But, this is ſuch an unreaſonable way of going to work, that he muſt be very ſhort-ſighted, who can't ſee the Abſurdity of it. For where, I pray, is the great difference between theſe, as they refer to Man's Faith; that is, ſuch Faith as ſhould have any Influence upon their Practice? Sure, whatever is above their Reaſon, is, in this reſpect, almoſt the ſame as if it were contrary to it: and the one is no more a fit foundation of Action to an intelligent or moral Agent, than the other. And

I would only ask Perſons of ſuch myſterious Principles, who ſo much vilify and depreciate human Reaſon; how, by what Means, or with what Powers or Faculties of their Minds, they believe Myſteries? They could not properly ſay, with their Underſtandings; becauſe, they confeſs, theſe are not able to reach them. Nor with their Wills, I'm ſure, conſider'd as a Faculties determin'd by proper Motives; becauſe the Will of every Being is, in the order of Nature, and in a moral Senſe, ſubſequent to the Underſtanding, and has no more to do with the immediate Perception, nor, conſequently, with the Belief, of things, than Memory has. The Will, in ſuch caſe, is not concern'd with them, but the Underſtanding only. And therefore no Man can, with any Propriety, be ſaid to believe Myſteries, nor is he at all concern'd with them, ſince he cannot perceive the real nature of 'em, nor diſcern any proper Evidences that might determine his Aſſent to 'em.

ANOTHER material Diſtinction, however, has been contriv'd for evading the force of this Argument; and that is, tho' Men can't believe this or the other myſterious Point by Reaſon, yet, they can do it by Faith, or that Faith lays a firm Foundation for their believing it. And, in order to ſupport this darling Scheme, the Votaries of it, generally, ſet theſe two in direct oppoſi-

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tion to one another; telling the World: things of ſuch a ſort are to be believ'd by Faith, and that Reaſon is not to be depended upon, becauſe 'tis ſhort-ſighted and fallible. But, what, I pray, is the real Meaning of believing by Faith? 'Tis certainly no more, when ſtript of its enthuſiaſtick Dreſs, than the believing a thing by believing it. And, how much good Senſe there is in the Expreſſion, any one, of, but, tolerable Senſe, may judge.

And yet, this is the very way that many Perſons believe ſeveral Doctrines, even becauſe they will do it. If they are examin'd how it comes to paſs that they give any Credit to Myſteries? They cannot poſſibly, give any other Anſwer, than that they do believe 'em; that they are above the human Underſtanding; that they are to be diſcern'd by Faith; and that Reaſon muſt ſtoop and ſubmit to them, they being vaſtly ſuperior to it, or infinitely above it, or the like. And, by theſe means, they confeſs, that their Faith is not rational, but only a credulous Aſſent to things, without having any Reaſon to found its Exiſtence upon. But,

To make their Scheme appear more plauſible, they will, further, tell us, that there are innumerable Myſteries in Nature, and ſeveral Properties belonging to Matter, which we don't underſtand, but, at the ſame time, believe; that there are many things, too, in

our own Frame and Conſtitution, which we are ignorant of, and, yet, make no queſtion about; and that the like may be allow'd to be in Religion.

AND now, to ſee the weakneſs of ſuch a way of arguing, we need only conſider, this is, really, ſaying no more than, we are imperfect Beings; limited in our Capacities, and bounded in our Knowledge; that we cannot account for the preciſe Methods or Ways, whereby the All-wiſe Creator has eſtabliſh'd a Connexion between Cauſes and Effects; nor form adequate Ideas of his whole Workmanſhip. But it never proves, that, if ſuch things were reveal'd to us, they could any longer be myſterious; becauſe that would be the ſame thing as to ſay they were reveal'd and not reveal'd at the ſame time; which would be a flat Contradiction in Terms.

THERE is no Property belonging to Matter above the Underſtanding of any Man, when once he's acquainted with it. Nor can he be oblig'd to believe what that Property is, or what is the Nature of it, until he knows it.

BESIDES, what are we properly to underſtand by Religion? If we examine fairly, we ſhall find, that it ſignifies thoſe things, only, which intelligent Beings, according to their ſeveral Capacities, Opportunities, and Circumſtances, are oblig'd to do. And, as

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it refers to reaſonable and accountable Creatures, we muſt grant that they can attain to a Knowledge of the Truth and Fitneſs of theſe things, before we can ſuppoſe them bound to believe or perform them; or that their Conſciences can be, in any reſpects, influenc'd by them. Nor,

WOULD it anſwer any end to ſay, Faith is an Act of the Divine Being, upon our Minds, by which we believe things that are above our Underſtandings. For this is both a Contradiction in Terms, and ruins the Cauſe it is intended to ſupport. If it be an Act of the Divine Being, the juſt Conſequence is, that it is not a human but divine Aſſent, and, by Parity of Reaſon, that it is not Man but God who believes: By which Conſideration it will evidently appear, that it can be no fit Foundation of Morality to us, nor a proper Spring of our Obedience.

NEITHER would it ſignify any thing to ſay, this or the other Doctrine came from God, and therefore ſhould be believ'd by us. For, the only Way we can judge, whether any Doctrine is from him or not, is, by perceiving it to be good or evil, true or falſe, and that it has or has not ſufficient Proofs of its Divinity: which, when it is myſterious, or above our Reaſon, we know nothing, and conſequently, can believe nothing about. And the Divine Being, who is perfectly righteous and good, muſt be allow'd, either to

give Men Faculties for underſtanding what he reveals; or elſe to require, only, ſuch things of them, as come within the reach of the Faculties which they have, that they may be able to know, of what ſort they are. One or t'other of theſe muſt be granted, whenever we ſuppoſe him to enjoin any thing upon them, which refers either to their Faith or Practice. And to think or ſpeak otherwiſe of him, would be to miſrepreſent him, and deſcribe him as, a very hard Maſter, reaping where he has not ſow'd, and gathering where he has not ſtraw'd: Which is a Character not only unſuitable to him, but which alſo throws the fouleſt Indignities upon him, and blemiſhes his moral and amiable Perfections.

INDEED if we put the Caſe ſo, that he diſcover'd to the World his Deſign to bring ſome extraordinary Event to paſs, the accompliſhing or the manner of accompliſhing which might ſeem difficult to human Foreſight, or hard for Men to account for, they would certainly be oblig'd, or at leaſt would have Reaſon, to believe it, if they had the higheſt degrees of Probability for it: becauſe theſe are ſufficient to determine in many Caſes; and the Notions which we form of the Deity are, that he is a Being of infinite Power, Veracity and Wiſdom; that he is true to his Word; able to do whatever

he promiſes; and therefore may be depended on for the Performance of it.

Or again,

If we ſuppoſe him to reveal to any part of Mankind, that their future Exiſtence ſhall be happy or miſerable, according to their Behaviour in their preſent State; this they have, likewiſe, Reaſon to believe, eſpecially when they find the Revelation authentic, and the Doctrines conſiſtent with their natural Notions of God. For, as he beſt knows the Nature of Things, of Cauſes and Effects, and his own Reſolutions or Deſigns in Government; ſo he may well be thought to give a juſt and true Account of 'em. Nor is there any thing herein either above or contrary to Reaſon; ſince it may be conſider'd after the ſame manner, that a piece of Science, which a wiſe Man communicates to his Friend who is not ſo knowing or learned as himſelf, might be conſider'd. And the like may be ſaid of things paſt; theſe alſo may be credited, when they are related by a Being of Veracity or Probity, and contain nothing that is contradictory to Reaſon, or above the Capacity of him who hears them. Thus,

A Man may believe, that there was ſuch a Perſon as Jeſus Chriſt, who liv'd in the World about Seventeen hundred Years ago; perform'd many wonderful Works in it; deliver'd a Syſtem of Morality for the Conduct of human Life; and at laſt died and roſe again

again from the Dead, according to the Scripture-Account of the whole. And he has, in ſome reſpects, no more Reaſon to queſtion the Truth of theſe things, than he has to doubt whether ſuch Perſons, as *Plato*, or *Cicero*, *Seneca*, or *Socrates*, ever exiſted. But, in things which are not ſo much of an hiſtorical as (if I may call them) a neceſſary and moral Nature, the Caſe is different. For, all things, of the latter ſort, are, in themſelves, independent; and don't owe their Being to any Agent or Cauſe, but have a ſelf-exiſtent Nature, which none can alter or deſtroy. For example; that two and three are equal to five, is an undeniable and ſelf-evident Truth, which does not depend upon any Mind for its Support. And if a Being of infinite Power and all other Perfections ſhould declare to us, that they are not equal to ſuch a Number, none could give him Credit; becauſe his Declaration would be contrary to Reaſon. Or if he ſhould aſſert, there is no difference between one and four, or that a thing might be one and four at the ſame time, that the one might contain the whole Nature and Eſſence of the four, or the four contain no more than the Nature or Eſſence of the one, tho' ſtill their Properties were very diſtinct, and their Quantities unequal; if he ſhould aſſert this, I ſay, there is no reaſonable or thinking Man in the Univerſe could believe him; ſuch an Aſſer-

tion being contrary to the moſt certain and demonſtrable Truths, and firſt Principles of Mathematics. However, if he ſhould further tell us; tho' it might be above our Capacities to ſee the Truth of it, or tho' we might think it againſt all Reaſon, yet he would prove it by a Miracle, or a Variety of Miracles done before our Eyes; even this could not lay any Foundation for his Credit; ſince all we could know in this Caſe is, that he did ſomething above human Power, or what we, properly, call miraculous; while the thing to be prov'd was contrary to our Reaſon, or, according to his Declaration, was above it, and ſo could neither be prov'd to us, nor be believ'd by us. Beſides,

If we were requir'd to give up our Underſtandings in judging of the Doctrine, we might as well do it in judging of the Miracles; and thus both of 'em muſt loſe their force, and the Intention of the Agent be, quite, fruſtrated.

The true State of the Caſe is really this: The Divine Being has diſtinguiſh'd Men from other Creatures, has implanted a Principle of Reaſon in them, and given them Faculties, by which they muſt examine all things, even thoſe, which are pretended to come from himſelf. Whatſoever is above their Capacities is not reveal'd, they know nothing of it, and therefore cannot believe it, nor affirm that they do ſo, without being guilty

guilty of a downright Falſhood: Becauſe by affirming it, they confeſs they ſee Reaſons for doing ſo, which cannot be true, when the thing is unintelligible.

TELL a Man, this or the other Doctrine came from God, and (tho' it may appear to be above his Underſtanding, or contrary to his Reaſon) was deſign'd to be a Rule of Life to him, or an Article of Faith; and then ask him if, he credits it? And, if the Man either thinks at all, or ſpeaks Truth, he ſhall certainly ſay that he does not. Or tell him: if he don't believe it, he ſhall ſeverely ſuffer for it; and this will never alter the Caſe, becauſe it won't convince his Judgment; tho', if he is not honeſt, it might, perhaps, make him prevaricate or diſſemble, in order to eſcape the Puniſhment. Nay, rack and torture him, or gradually preſs him to Death, and, upon every Weight which you lay upon him, ask him if he don't yet believe? And if he declares Truth, he ſhall certainly ſay that he don't. Mens Judgments are not to be work'd upon, like their Paſſions, by Power and Authority, by Menaces and Threats, nor by arbitrary and deſpotick Decrees; no; but by fair Reaſon and Argument, and the real Appearances of things. If theſe ſeem, in themſelves, to be good or evil, true or falſe, they muſt believe 'em to be ſo, and, after Enquiry, cannot, indeed, help it. But if

if they appear to be neither of theſe, they know nothing of 'em at all.

INDEED, if one Being threatens to diſtreſs another, unleſs he actually credits this or the other Thing or Fact; it ought to make him, in point of Prudence, impartial in his Enquiries, and to give a fair Hearing to it. This is the leaſt he ſhould do for his own Safety. But if, after doing this, he can't ſee in what Senſe the thing is true, or how it ſhould be underſtood; or if he finds it repugnant to Reaſon or Truth, he can't believe it; nor can the other, in point of Equity, puniſh him for it; becauſe the Man's Reaſon muſt, always, be his Guide, and the firſt and laſt Rule of Judgment to him.

BUT, perhaps it might be ask'd, is not this arguing againſt Experience and Fact? For, are there not many Perſons who believe Myſteries, and make no more doubt of 'em than they do of their own Exiſtence? And in anſwer to this, it muſt be confeſs'd, that too many do ſo, and it is to be regretted they do it. Thus many, in ſome Senſe, believe the ſtrangeſt Abſurdities in the World. The Papiſts, for inſtance, believe Tranſubſtantiation; and ſome Proteſtants believe things which are neither poſſible nor reaſonable; Such as eternal Juſtification, that ſome were juſtified before they were created, or were declar'd righteous Men, before they were Men or Boys; with ſeveral others equally abſurd. The

Prejudice of Education, the Influence of a Party, and the Love of favourite Syſtems or Schemes, do oddly byaſs and clog their Minds, and hinder them from examining the Grounds of their Belief. And it's poſſible that ſome Men might, in one Senſe, be made believe any thing. This may be all true. But then certain it is at the ſame time, that their Faith is not rational at all, nor merits any better Name than that of Credulity. And it were more proper to ſay that ſuch Perſons don't believe but imagine ſuch things. Imagination, with them, aſſumes the Appearance, and uſurps the Place of Faith, becauſe they don't make a right Uſe of their own Reaſon. For Faith is properly a firm Perſuaſion of Mind concerning the Truth or Lawfulneſs of a thing: Concerning the Truth of it, as it refers to Principles or Facts; concerning the Lawfulneſs of it, as it refers to Practice or Morals. And, as, in the latter Caſe, a Man ſhould not do any thing, before he's convinc'd that it is lawful for him to do it; ſo neither, in the former, ſhould he take any thing into his Creed, which is not agreeable to his own Reaſon and Judgment, or of which his Mind does not give its impartial Verdict, that it has, at leaſt, the ſtrongeſt Probability of Truth on its ſide. Therefore,

THEY, who take up with Doctrines upon truſt, or, do imagine rather than believe 'em, can

can merit no Praiſe from God or Man; ſince by the ſame Way they would have been Pagans, Mahometans, or Jews in any Place, where the Religions of theſe Men obtained. And it is more owing to Providence or Chance, than to any good Management of their own, that they are Chriſtians: Becauſe their Faith, that Chriſtianity is a Divine Revelation, is wholly to be attributed to Education, Cuſtom, Faſhion, or the like; and not to any rational Enquiry they ever made about it, or any Conviction which ſhould ariſe from Enquiry.

BUT, to ſet this Matter in a ſtronger Light; let us ſuppoſe that any Myſtery were to influence our Practice; or, that, upon our imaginary Belief of it, we were to act this or the other way, or do this or the other thing; and then let us try what would be the Conſequence. It would, infallibly be this; namely, that we ſinn'd againſt the expreſs Laws of Nature and Revelation; becauſe we were influenc'd to Action, by a Principle which we did not underſtand, or of which we had no well-grounded Perſuaſion or ſolid Conviction that it was agreeable to Reaſon or Truth. And by theſe means we muſt incur the Diſpleaſure of God, who has the higheſt Regard for our Happineſs, and has, therefore, commanded us, in every thing we do, to exerciſe our Reaſon, and to be determin'd by the laſt Judgment of it.

It was upon this account that he diſtinguiſh'd us from Brutes, and honour'd us with his own Image; namely, that we might diſcern the Differences of things, and, upon that Diſcernment, make a proper Choice. And when this End is not anſwer'd by us, or when we pay no Regard to it, we offend againſt his plain Commands, and forfeit all Claim to his Favour or Affection. Even this muſt be the Conſequence, tho' the thing, which we did, might happen to be right, or might prove in the Iſſue no way detrimental to us; it being done without any perſonal Perſuaſion that it was proper or fit, or had a good Tendency; which muſt render the Action defective in Virtue, and us culpable for the Performance of it.

UPON this account, St. *Paul*, by Divine Direction, tells us, that whatſoever is not of Faith, or does not appear, after due Enquiry and Perſuaſion, to be lawful, is Sin; is a Violation of the Law of Reaſon, and, in conſequence thereof, of the Law of God. And, when ſpeaking of things of an indifferent Nature, he ſays, we ſhould not even do theſe, if we have any Scruple or Doubt about them; becauſe, upon Reflection, we muſt condemn our ſelves for it, and, if we, habitually, perſiſted in ſuch a Courſe, muſt be condemn'd of God.

Now, the Argument is the very ſame when applied to any Myſteries which affect

our

our Practice. For, when a Perſon does not underſtand in what Senſe they are true, or cannot fix upon any determinate Meaning, in which he may anchor his Faith, and be ſatisfied about them, he acts beneath the Dignity of his Nature, and ſins againſt God, to let his Life be influenc'd by the credulous Belief of 'em. And the Divine Being might juſtly ſay to him upon giving up his Accounts: How didſt thou employ that noble Faculty wherewithal I dignified thee? Thou waſt thereby enabled to diſtinguiſh between Good and Evil; Truth and Falſhood; and to underſtand every thing that concern'd either thy Faith or Practice. Nay, thou waſt capable, thro' the Exerciſe of it, to attain to the Knowledge of me thy Maker; and to deduce the Nature of my Being and Perfections. And how cameſt thou to take things of Importance for granted, or ſubmit thy Underſtanding to any Guide? By what means didſt thou comply with the Principles of a Party; or blindly aſſent to their Determinations? Didſt thou imagine, that the righteous Judge of all the Earth would not do right; or would require more of thee, than what he gave thee? Was not thine own Reaſon deſign'd to be thy Rule; and were not all things of Moment to be meaſured by it? How then did it happen that thou didſt fooliſhly give it up to the precarious Conduct or Guidance of others? Or why didſt thou

believe

believe things that they impos'd upon thee; and let thy Practice be influenc'd by their Principles? I might as well have form'd thee a Brute, as honour'd thee with ſo fine a Nature, when thou didſt not improve it to the Purpoſes for which I gave it, but blindly followedſt as others led thee.

——My Brethren, if any of us were thus examin'd at the Divine Tribunal, who took up with Doctrines which are above our Reaſon, and which, therefore, we could not properly be ſaid to believe, could we in Conſcience think them worthy of God, or that he would juſtify us upon the credulous Belief of 'em? Or could we imagine that, by ſaying to him, "Lord, theſe things were re-"preſented to us as Myſteries, were aſſerted "by Fathers in the primitive Ages, and "maintain'd by ſome in our own Times, "and, therefore, we tamely ſubmitted our "Underſtandings to them"; could we imagine, I ſay, that this would excuſe us, or in the leaſt extenuate our Fault? I would be far from invading or aſſuming the Prerogative of our great Judge, but I am afraid, this would be but a poor Defence, and, of little Service towards juſtifying us, before God, at the Great Day. For, Myſteries can never concern us at all; becauſe the firſt and main Talent, which we are intruſted with, is, our own Reaſon, which we muſt ever make the Rule or Standard of all things

that

that come after, or are pretended to be Divine. For,

As God, when he perceiv'd the deplorable State of the World immers'd in Immorality and Wickedneſs, knew, what Precepts or Inſtructions were proper to be given them, by his own Underſtanding; as Jeſus Chriſt, too, when he receiv'd Orders from God to deliver theſe Inſtructions to the World, muſt have judg'd of 'em by his Underſtanding; and, as the Diſciples and Apoſtles of Jeſus Chriſt, when they had a Command given them to preach the Goſpel, muſt have judg'd of the Nature of it by their Underſtandings; juſt ſo, and no otherwiſe, muſt all Men, when they have any Notices of the Will of God, or any Revelation from Chriſt or his Apoſtles, judge of 'em, and every Part and Article of 'em, by their Underſtandings. Nor, can any Perſon anſwer to God or his Conſcience, if he obeys any Dictates or Impulſes, whether proceeding from the Spirit of God, or any other Agent, internal or external, angelic or human, unleſs he firſt conſiders the Quality of them, and is convinc'd that they are good in their Nature and Tendency. This is what every one who thinks at all will be oblig'd to allow. And we may learn by the Conſideration of it, that the indulgent Parent of the Univerſe has the higheſt Regard for our Happineſs, and would have us to run no Riſques of forfeiting it, or be-

ing depriv'd of it; but to take all poſſible and ſure Ways to ſecure it, that we may anſwer the End of our Creation or Exiſtence. And therefore it concerns us to think like Men, to believe like Men, and to live like Men, that we may die like Men, and be approv'd of God. For altho' ſome Perſons may be timorous to venture upon trying all Doctrines by their own Reaſon, or may think it a bold Attempt to do it; yet we may be certain and confident that the Divine Being approves it, and never loves us more than when we are induſtrious. And, if it happens, at any time, that we are, really, wrong; yet, if we are honeſt and ſincere, we are ſtill right. This, at firſt, may ſeem a Paradox, but, after Enquiry, it will be found Truth. For, two may be wrong in their Notions of things, when, at the ſame time, one or both may be right. They may be wrong ſo far as to fall ſhort of that perfect Underſtanding of 'em which a Being of ſuperior Diſcernment has. But they are right when they are unprejudic'd in their Enquiries, and determin'd by the Report of their own Judgments. No Man can be blam'd for not having the Capacity of an Angel, or, for not having a Genius equal to the greateſt. No; his Fault lies chiefly in not fairly exerciſing his own, and either in haſtily believing things, before he has carefully examin'd and known them, or, after he

he has done both, in oppoſing his Underſtanding, and acting againſt clear Conviction. Theſe only render him faulty or blameable; but the contrary Management muſt always recommend him, and entitle him to the Divine Approbation or Acceptance. For God, in this caſe, muſt make the Man's, and not his own, Judgment, the Standard of Sincerity. The Divine Underſtanding, 'tis true, muſt judge how far the Man has done his part, or acted ſuitable to the Capacity he receiv'd; but that Capacity muſt be made the Rule, with which his Principles are all compar'd, and from which his Obedience derives its Name. Impoſſible Conditions can't be requir'd of him; nor can any Terms of Acceptance be made, but ſuch as are reaſonable and equitable in their Nature. And therefore it can no more be a Fault in Men not to be infallible, than it can be in Brutes not to equal them in Diſcernment. For, what is it that properly conſtitutes an Obligation? 'Tis the actual Poſſibility as well as Fitneſs of a thing for the Agent. And, if it is not in my Power to attain to that perfect Knowledge which the ſupreme Intelligence arrives at, it would be very unjuſt to oblige me to it, or lay me under Penalties, meerly, for not doing it. My own Reaſon muſt be my Rule, and the Meaſure of all my Obligations. Or in other words; the things requir'd of me muſt be proportion'd to my Faculties:

If they are of the Nature of Doctrines, they muſt be plain and intelligible, or adapted to the thinking Powers which I have. If they are of the Nature of Precepts which I am to obſerve, they muſt be ſuited to my Ability, and Circumſtances in Life. And thus, every thing, that concerns either the Faith or Practice of Mankind, muſt be proportion'd to their ſeveral Capacities, before any Obligation can juſtly ariſe.

THUS I have conſider'd the Nature of Faith or Believing in general; and ſhall now proceed in improving the Subject to ſuch good Purpoſes, as may be of Service towards the Direction of human Life and Manners. And,

I. WE may learn from what has been ſaid, that whatſoever is enjoin'd upon us as an Article of Faith, muſt be reduc'd to a rational Senſe, or ſet in ſuch a Light as our Reaſon will bear, before any Being can demand our Belief of it, or can, juſtly, require us to aſſent to it as neceſſary Truth. And if this Method were taken or allow'd of, how happy would it be for Mankind in general, and how eaſy and comfortable for Chriſtians in particular. Did many Men but think as they ought to do, did they conſider that the moſt reaſonable Doctrine is beſt, and that the Divine Being can require us to believe nothing but what is ſuch; they would not

talk ſo much about Myſteries in Religion, nor make them important Articles of their Creed: Much leſs would they condemn thoſe who diſown them; or look upon 'em as Enemies to Truth. And, this I will venture to ſay, whatever Cenſure I may incur by it, That nothing can be Truth, nor claim that ſacred Name, that hides from Reaſon; but, that every thing may, juſtly, be ſuſpected to be falſe, that will not ſtand the Teſt of it.

Is it not, then, Matter of Amazement, when a Doctrine will admit of a rational Meaning, and may be reconcil'd with good Senſe, that any ſhould eagerly and warmly contend, nay, labour with all their Might to ſet it in a ridiculous Light, in order to keep up the venerable Name of Myſteries? What does this look like but Policy and Prieſtcraft, and an ambitious Deſire to impoſe upon Mankind? 'Tis a ready way to deſtroy Chriſtianity, and prejudice all the Sober and Judicious againſt it! And yet,

How many abſurd and ridiculous things do ſome Perſons, at leaſt, profeſs? What ſtrange Articles of Faith do they maintain? And in what a monſtrous and frightful Garb do they dreſs, or rather muffle, up Religion? A Queſtion like this in our Text is very proper to be propos'd to them; Believe ye theſe things? Are ye convinc'd or perſuaded in your own Minds and Judgments that they

are true? 'Twere not however ſo very material, whether they believ'd them or not, if they did not diſcourage thoſe who cannot aſſert them. This is the moſt melancholy Circumſtance in the Caſe, namely, that Virtue, which is only conſiſtent with Sincerity and Freedom of Choice, ſhould meet with ſo little Countenance or Favour, in a World into which God ſent both his Son and Spirit to make us free: And that Men ſhould hate and perſecute one another, meerly for acting according to their own Conſciences! 'Tis a lamentable thing, that it ſhould be heard of in a Chriſtian Country, eſpecially where Proteſtant Principles are aſſerted, and Popiſh and Heatheniſh Enormities are condemn'd: And, more eſpecially, where Reaſon, without Revelation, is repreſented as a very weak and inſufficient Guide!

For why ſhould any Man, or Society of Men, lord it over their Neighbours, or look the worſe upon them, becauſe they think differently from them, or don't believe to a Tittle like themſelves? While the World laſts, and while one is not another, or is different from two, there will be a variety of Opinions about leſſer Matters, and perfect Harmony is not to be expected. In Heaven it ſelf the Diverſity will continue, ſince Happineſs is only conſiſtent with Liberty, and we muſt always be left to our own Choice. And therefore it muſt be an unrighteous thing

thing to condemn any one for his Principles, unleſs they are contrary to the plain and neceſſary things wherein all Men are generally agreed, and to which the Laws of their own Nature cannot but oblige them to conſent. The Difference between moral Good and Evil is ſo perceptible and intelligible, that no Man in his Senſes can miſs of ſeeing it; can miſtake one for t'other thro' a Defect of his Reaſon, or be ignorant that the former alone tends to publick and private Good. Never was human Nature at ſo low an Ebb, but Perſons could diſtinguiſh between right and wrong. If they, at any time, err'd in common Matters, or thoſe which refer to Right and Property, and affect the Intereſt of Civil Society, it was owing to the impoſing Arts of thoſe, to whom they reſign'd their Underſtandings. And this, by the way, is an Argument why all Attempts to impoſe upon Conſcience, and diſcourage Men from conducting themſelves by it, ſhould be vigorouſly withſtood; even becauſe they tend to ruin the World, and introduce Diſorder and Miſery into it.

SINCE Morality, then, is ſo intelligible in it ſelf, and the Practice of it the Support of Society, we may ſafely conclude, when any one violates the Rules of it, that he acts contrary to his own Conviction; it being granted by the common Conſent of Mankind, that all moral Agents are capable of diſtin-

diſtinguiſhing between Virtue and Vice, and of knowing the former to be moſt eligible. And this Conſideration makes it lawful for us, not only to cenſure and condemn, but alſo, ſometimes, to diſcountenance and puniſh Perſons, for their Actions; as well knowing, that, if they exercis'd the Faculties which God gave them, and did not reſign them to the Guidance of others, they muſt have ſeen the moral Pravity of their Deeds. But the peculiar Notions, which, after an impartial Enquiry, Men form of Religion, and which reſpect the future more than the preſent World, muſt, in the Nature of things, be always innocent; nay, on ſome accounts, muſt be praiſe-worthy and laudable; and, conſequently, can, of themſelves, be no juſt Reaſon for their Diſcouragement. In all Matters of this ſort, and when Religion alone is concern'd, the Terms of Acceptance with God ſhould be made the Terms of Acceptance with Men; and, when any others are inſiſted upon, the Divine Province is invaded or infring'd, and a Power ſuperior to God's is claim'd.

HENCE it follows, that no Body of Men, no Society of Chriſtians, no Church or Churches, Triumphant or Militant, in Heaven or in Earth, have a Right to form ſtanding Articles, and oblige Men againſt their Conſciences to aſſent to them, under Penalty of Excluſion from their Communion. No;

Religion,

Religion, which is ever ſeated in the Mind, and only conſiſtent with private Judgment, ſhould be as common as the Light of the Sun, and Communion as free as the Air we breathe in. The Reaſon is, becauſe all Men, conſider'd as reaſonable Creatures, derive their Rights of Communion from God, who has placed them in the common Relation of Brethren, and in a State of mutual Dependance. And, while their Sentiments are innocent to the Society, they cannot, poſſibly, forfeit their Rights, by not being ſubject to anthoritative Impoſitions. Now,

THAT they are and muſt be innocent, will appear, by conſidering that they are owing to impartial Enquiry, are enforc'd by the Law of Reaſon and Conſcience, and only or meerly reſpect the future World. Where, then, is the harm in maintaining them? Or who is damag'd by the Belief of 'em? Every one is ſenſible of Pleaſure and Pain, and knows when he ſuffers any Injury or not. Can it, therefore, be juſtifiable, in any reſpect, to make the Duties of Juſtice and Charity to depend upon Terms which are unreaſonable? Or is it, indeed, a commendable or Chriſtian Practice, to exclude Men from any Advantages, or to give 'em unneceſſary Pain, for maintaining Sentiments which in themſelves are right, and which, if others maintain'd, would be thought to be ſo? By no means, ſure. On the contrary, it will

will be found to be very wrong, and contrary to every thing that's civil or humane.

II. We may infer from what has been ſaid, that none ſhould be haſty or raſh in crediting things, nor look upon 'em as real Verities, before they underſtand the true Nature of 'em. This Rule is very neceſſary to be obſerv'd, becauſe the Welfare of Society depends, in a great meaſure upon it; and many Diſorders and Diſcontents, Heats and Animoſities, both publick and private, might be prevented, if it were well attended to. Suſpicion, indeed, when 'tis moderate in degree, and regulated by Reaſon, can never prejudice any Perſon or Cauſe. 'Tis that which excites us to Vigilance in our Conduct, and often ſecures us from Miſchiefs which would befal us, if we had nothing of it implanted in us, or did not miſtruſt upon any occaſion. But Credulity is oppoſite to all good Senſe, is an Enemy to every kind of Happineſs, and generally the Inlet, if not the Parent, of numberleſs Calamities. 'Tis that which ruins Kingdoms and States, breeds Confuſion in all Societies, and creates ſuch Diſturbance in the moral World, that the firſt Clamour ſhall, ſometimes, go nigh to unhinge it, and turn it, like the Natural of old, into a perfect Chaos. Whereas, when Men are govern'd by Reaſon, when they conſider calmly, examine impartially, and

ſtay

ſtay till they ſee things in their proper Light, or till theſe appear in their genuine Shape, and they underſtand their Nature and Tendency; when they manage thus, they act like Men, and not only preſerve their eſtabliſh'd Tranquillity, but ſecure themſelves from real and imaginary Evils. For, Conviction is a ſure Foundation for Happineſs; and ſometimes, it can't be attain'd to without Labour. But to proceed,

III. And, Laſtly, We may learn from the whole, ſince Perſons are oblig'd to believe thoſe things only which they can underſtand, and which therefore they may underſtand, that no Man can plead Ignorance of his Duty, but he is wholly inexcuſable if he does not perform it. The human Mind, as I have ſaid, is capable of diſcerning the plain Differences of things, and muſt ſee and believe that one thing is more fit, or a more proper Motive to action, than another. And without this Conceſſion, we muſt deny that Men are moral Agents, or are ſubject to moral Government. However, to prevent us from being corrupted in our Morals, and that we might ſteer our Courſe more ſteddily to Heaven, the Divine Being has been pleas'd to point out the Way to us, in a plain Revelation which he has given us; and which, upon impartial Enquiry, we muſt believe, and acknowledge to be worthy of his Wiſ-

dom and Goodneſs. But ſtill all Belief ſhould ſhould have a right Influence upon our Practice, ſhould make us regulate our Lives to the beſt Purpoſe, and ſhould cauſe us to behave in ſuch a manner, as the Nature of the things believ'd by us, the Fitneſs of one thing beyond another, and our Capacities for acting do require. If a Perſon is perſuaded that this or the other thing is true, the Duty then incumbent upon him is, to learn ſuch a Leſſon, as it ſhould teach him, and to infer ſuch uſeful Documents or Morals from it, as, in general, it contains. And, by Parity of Reaſon, if it is our Belief that Religion is a real thing, or the Goſpel a Divine Revelation, the proper Effect which ſhould be produc'd from it, is, Obedience to all the Laws which that Revelation contains, and a Diſcharge of the particular Obligations which our Reaſon diſcerns to be be couch'd under its general Rules. The naked Belief of their Goodneſs or Truth can never recommend us, nor make us better Men or Chriſtians. On the contrary, we ſhall be more uneaſy in our ſelves, and more expos'd to the Condemnation of God, if we don't give our Faith its due Scope, and proceed to ſuch Duties as it points out to us. Thus, we find upon acting contrary to our Belief, that we are always more diſquieted than when we act otherwiſe, even tho' the Actions at both times are, perhaps, with reſpect to their

their outward Conſequences, alike. And hence it comes to paſs, that when Perſons knowingly or wilfully do things that are bad, they feel in proportion a ſharper Remorſe, being conſcious to themſelves, that if they had manag'd as they might have done, they needed not have committed them. And,

For theſe and other Reaſons, methinks 'tis ſtrange, any ſhould ſo far impoſe upon themſelves, as to imagine that their believing any Principles, or maintaining an orthodox Faith, can ever recommend them to the Favour of God, if withal they don't obſerve the Rules of Virtue. 'Tis a dangerous Miſtake to fancy that it ſhould, and, indeed, 'tis as fooliſh as fatal or dangerous.

And, if it be the Caſe of any of us, that we don't believe the Goſpel to be true, let us at the ſame time conſider, that it is ſtill our Intereſt to be virtuous on all ſides, and to do all the Good that we are capable of doing in the World. The Reaſons and Motives to Religion, don't entirely depend upon the Goſpel, but are plain and obvious from a Review of the Relations in which we ſtand to God and Man; and ſhould be regarded by us, tho' there were no future Exiſtence at all. To worſhip the Deity, and ſeriouſly to reverence him, and to love our Fellow-creatures and do good to them, is ſtill our Duty and Advantage upon the whole, without taking a future State into the Account. For we are never ſo eaſy or ſafe, as

when we are careful and punctual in performing theſe things; as our own Experience will ſufficiently teach us. Does it not make us calm and compos'd in our Minds, when we ſincerely addreſs our Creator and Lord? And does it not fill us with the nobleſt Satisfaction and Pleaſure, when we diſcharge the Duties of ſocial Life, or when we act according to the Fitneſs of things, or, which is the ſame, the Laws of our Nature? Nay, does it not recommend us to public Eſteem, and lay a Foundation for popular Credit, when we are obſervant of all the Rules of Juſtice? When we are honeſt in our Dealings, charitable in our Actions, and ſober and temperate in our common Converſation? Undoubtedly it does. And therefore, I ſay, whether we believe the Goſpel to be true, or are perſuaded of the Reality of a future State, or not, we are always bound, if we would conſult our greateſt Happineſs upon the whole, to obſerve the main things which the Goſpel enjoins. If it would be our Intereſt to be virtuous to Eternity, it muſt certainly be the ſame to be virtuous in Time, and to live ſo here as we ſhould do hereafter, upon condition that we were, then, to exiſt. Our Life, Health, Reputation and Fortune, do very much depend upon a right Management, and will be better maintain'd by living by Rule, than if we obſerv'd no Order or Oeconomy. And if this is not our real Belief, we do not think to

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any good Purpoſe, nor exerciſe the Faculties our Creator gave us. And therefore moſt reaſonable is St. *Paul*'s Declaration, when he tells us that Godlineſs is profitable unto all things, having a Promiſe of the Life, that is, the Happineſs, which now is, and of that which is to come.

To conclude all; Since every Man's Faith is not alike, and none can be eaſy but upon acting from Choice; let us all be ſo good as to bear with one another in every Difference which does not affect or injure us. And as we would deſire to live our own Way, and enjoy the Liberties which we are entitled to, let us allow other Folks to do the ſame, becauſe 'tis as fit they ſhould do it as we.

And withal, let us be generous and charitable, kind and benevolent, to one another; and, then, we ſhall pleaſe God, who loves Truth, and who will reward thoſe that heartily embrace it.

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any good Purpose, nor exercise the Faculties our Creator gave us. And therefore most reasonable is St. Paul's Declaration, when he tells us that Godliness is profitable unto all things, having a Promise of the Life, that is, the Happiness, which now is, and of that which is to come.

To conclude all; Since every Man's Faith is not alike, and none can be easy but upon acting from Choice; let us all be so good as to bear with one another in every Difference which does not affect or injure us. And as we would desire to live our own Way, and enjoy the Liberties which we are entitled to, let us allow other Folks to do the same, because 'tis as fit they should do it as we.

And withal, let us be generous and charitable, kind and benevolent, to one another; and, then, we shall please God, who loves Truth, and who will reward those that heartily embrace it.

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